

AMERINDIAN PERSPECTIVISM AND NON-HUMAN RIGHTS

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This paper starts from Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument that in the newly named era of the Anthropocene—when human beings have become such a destructive force to the environment that they have acquired the status of geological agents, capable of interfering with the most basic processes of the Earth—, the history of culture can no longer be separated from the history of the species and of nature itself. I then develop the insight that the Anthropocene renews the relevance of Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's Ameridian perspectivism, a theory based on the widespread Amerindian postulate of an originary state of indifferentiation between humans and animals, and that the original condition common to humans and animals is not animality, as in Western thought, but humanity itself. The abundance of Amerindian narratives in which animals, plants, and spirits see themselves as humans is analyzed as an Anthropomorphic impulse that paradoxically contains an anti-anthropocentric potential, as “in a world where everything is human, being human is not that special.” The contrast between Amerindian anthropomorphism and Western anthropocentrism is further developed in the context of the recent Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions, which for the first time confer on animals, plants, and bodies of water the condition of juridical subjects endowed with rights. The conclusion points toward the notion of non-human rights as a necessary and urgent task in the era of the Anthropocene.

Anthropotechnique and Thanatopolitics

The concept of human rights has always been haunted by its necessary yet impossible universality. On the one hand, human rights would mean nothing if the notion did not

theoretically extend to the totality of human beings, the entirety of the human community on Earth. On the other [hand](#), its unmistakably European origins have systematically cast a shadow on how universally applicable they are or have been, and what particular, specific interests are at stake when they are invoked or defended. The tension between universalism and particularism has been at the very heart of the struggles around human rights, and my purpose here is not to solve that tension. It is, rather, to recast it in dialogue with a set of reflections developed [in past decades](#) by Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro under the rubric of “Amerindian perspectivism,” as well as my observation of Bolivia's and Ecuador's experiences in writing constitutions that have significantly rethought the limits and scope of human rights. This recasting will acquire its full meaning once I take into account Dipesh Chakrabarty's recent call for a renewed understanding of the blurring of the border between nature and culture in the light of the unprecedented environmental crisis brought about by global warming. My purpose here will, then, be to ask what happens to human rights once we factor in recent developments in the critique of anthropocentrism, a guiding thread that runs through the Andean constitutions, Chakrabarty's essay, and Viveiros de Castro's oeuvre.

Illustrious among contemporary interrogations of human rights is Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's referral of the notion back to its origins in the French Revolution. In his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben takes his cue from Hannah Arendt to show that in the very *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* there is a disjunction between the two terms that designate the subjects of rights, as “man” is presumably inclusive of “citizen.” There is something aporetic, then, about the conjunction “and” that connects “man” and “citizen,” as the second term is supposedly included in the first. Agamben shows how the presumably natural, biological rights acquired by humans in the very act of being born (as stated by Article 1 of the *Déclaration*: “Les hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits”) are traversed by the paradoxical requirement that those rights be validated in reference to a non-natural, historical construction, namely the nation state. Article 3 of the same *Déclaration* establishes that human rights should be referred to a sovereign power: “Le principe de toute Souveraineté réside essentiellement dans la Nation,” the same nation, Agamben notes, that is etymologically related to *naissance*, birth. Biology and politics are,

therefore, inextricably linked within human rights, and Agamben takes that link as an index to the limits of the concept.

Agamben hypothesizes with good reason that if man is only a subject of human rights to the extent that he is also a citizen, then the masses deprived of citizenship are an interesting cue to investigate the limits of the concept. It is not by chance that “starting with World War I, many European states began to pass laws allowing the denaturalization and denationalization of their own citizens” (16-7). France (1915), Belgium (1922), Italy (1926), and Austria (1933) provide some of the precursors to the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 that divided “German citizens into citizens with full rights and citizens without political rights” (17). As has become canonical in the past two decades, the concept of *homo sacer*—the bearer of that life which can be annihilated without sacrifice or mourning— emerges in the context of Agamben's reflections on the difficulty in distinguishing the condition of refuge from the condition of statelessness, that is on the one hand the (presumably) temporary exclusion from the sovereign space where human rights are validated and, on the other hand, the condition of being completely deprived of all possible reference to any such space. In “Beyond Human Rights,” a short piece from 1993 that prepares the longer meditation published two years later as *Homo Sacer*, Agamben takes the “425 Palestinians expelled by the state of Israel” (24) as emblems of the no-man's-land inhabited by the *homo sacer*. By binding the condition proper to humanity to the sovereignty of a nation state, therefore, the concept of human rights can be best understood as one that is perennially haunted by its outside. For Agamben, rather than emancipating us from sovereign power, human rights “have the effect of further inscribing us—on the basis of our 'bare life'—within the mechanisms of the biopolitical state” (Lechte and Newman 523).

The two subjects of rights explicitly mentioned in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* are, therefore, man insofar as he is born and man insofar as he is subjected to the sovereignty of a nation state. The gender-specific pronoun is deliberate here, and it adds to the aporetic nature of the coupling of “man” and “citizen.” Whereas explicitly excluded from the latter category at the time, women were presumably included in the latter—although that inclusion itself reinstated the aporia of a gender-specific pronoun made to stand for all of humankind.¹ For Agamben, the theoretical coupling of life as a biological fact and life as a

politically qualified experience does not have the structure of a simple binary opposition. Agamben argued that the Greeks distinguished between *zoé* as unqualified life (the life that is shared by humans, animals, gods) and *bíos*, the qualified life proper to humans. In that he was following Michel Foucault, who defined the modern age as that moment in which natural life began to be included in the calculations and mechanisms of state power and, therefore, the realm of politics became properly biopolitical. Beginning in 1977, Foucault's seminars in the Collège de France focused “on the passage from the 'territorial state' to the 'population state' and the ensuing vertiginous growth in the importance of biological life and the health of the nation as a problem for sovereign power” (Agamben 11). Agamben goes further, however, in claiming that *zoé*, i.e. bare life, has the “singular privilege of being that upon whose exclusion the city of men is founded” (15). Modernity relies, according to Agamben, on a simultaneous capturing and exclusion of life, to the point where “politics does not know any value other than life itself” (17).

But there are reasons to believe that the separation between *zoé* and *bíos* was far less clear-cut in Greek thought than Agamben would have it. This is the starting point of the argument offered by Argentinean philosopher Fabián Ludueña in his remarkable *La comunidad de los espectros*. To be true, in his seminar *The Beast and the Sovereign* Jacques Derrida had noticed that the dichotomy between a general realm of unqualified life (*zoé*) and the life qualified with human attributes (*bíos*) was unsustainable and in fact nowhere to be found, as a stable dichotomy, in the Aristotelian text. Ludueña further argues that isolating these two dimensions was not possible because “politics was not a supplement to life—now defined as *bíos*—added a posteriori to a substratum constituted by a primary *zoé*, as Agamben sustained” (Ludueña 30).² In other words, there is no politics that transcends the biological fact of life itself or remains uncontaminated by it. Politics is always already the managing of *zoé*. According to Derrida's and Ludueña's rereadings, then, the very attempt to separate a properly human dimension of life (that is, *bíos*) from the brute animality that goes by name of *zoé* was itself a technique in the production of humanity, a device in the domestication of *zoé*, a political taming of animality. The primary substance of politics, then, should not go by the name of biopolitics, as in Foucault or Agamben, but rather *zoopolitics* (Nodari 2).

Ludueña calls *anthropotechniques* the set of devices, discursive practices, disciplines, methods, and techniques through which human communities operate upon their animal nature in order to change, rewrite, expand their biological substratum with a view to the production of what we have called “man” (15). *La comunidad de los espectros* is a remarkable tour de force on how Theology and Law have provided two powerful instances of such anthropotechnological operation. In opposition to Agamben's argument, what is at stake in the production of humanity for Ludueña is not simply an exclusion of *zoos*, of the animal. Politics has set itself, from the beginning, “the art of domestication of the human animal” (Ludueña 21), in a process where *politics is always coextensive with eugenics*. Accompanying Ancient zoopolitics as the selective production of life, Ludueña argues, there was a *thanatopolitics* that regulated the discarding of “defective” offspring that could harm the species' biological patrimony (57). Ludueña presents, then, abundant evidence that the relationship between *zoé* and *bíos* is not one of constitutive exclusion, as Agamben argued, but rather one of conjunction, in which the very administration of animality was a technique in the production of man.

In a review of Ludueña's *La comunidad de los espectros*, Brazilian essayist Alexandre Nodari noted the link between census and censorship, insofar as “the counting of properties and population, its redistribution according to governmental calculations in classes, the registry of births and deaths, etc. allowed for a better organization of the republic, facilitating the detection and correction of unproductive elements (the vagabonds) by the censor” (3).³ Both in the Aristotelian response to Platonic eugenics and in Christianity, Ludueña identified different attempts at producing an anthropotechnique that demanded that life be separated away from its intensity, force, and animality, which then had to be measured, confined, calculated, and framed. Christianity would later think of immortality as the essential attribute that separates the human from the animal. The Christian invention of man drew upon a methodical elimination of the primordial animal, as for Thomas Aquinas non-human animals had “no place in the Kingdom of God” (Nodari 4). Socratic Greece and Christianity shared an attempt to purge animality out of man, to abolish the *animalitas* proper to man. One could argue for the existence of a continuity between the anthropotechniques of Christianity and those of modern humanism. From Descartes to Heidegger, animals tend to appear in the philosophical text

precisely when the essence of humanity is being defined. In Descartes's works, the anthropotechnical operation takes place in the equation of mind and soul and the definition of animals as machine-like beings devoid of soul or consciousness. In *La comunidad de los espectros*, Ludueña is rightfully skeptical of some of the alternatives to anthropotechniques that have been proposed, from the project of an affirmative biopolitics to the illusory attempt to void Christian patriarchy by returning to its Pauline foundations, such as exemplified by Alain Badiou or Slavoj Žižek. Rather than escaping anthropotechniques by carving a path that presumably bypasses them, my purpose here will be, rather, to ask what happens to them once we take into account a number of recent developments in law, anthropology, and cultural studies that have questioned our anthropocentric heritage.

***On the impact of the Anthropocene upon Cultural Studies*⁴**

The concept of a new period named Anthropocene, coined by ecologist Eugene Stoermer and later widely used by atmospheric chemist and Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen, designates a new geological era to which the Earth is currently transitioning. The advent of the previous era, the Holocene—which replaced the last ice age, or the Pleistocene, about 10,000 years ago—coincided with the emergence of the institutions that we have come to associate with civilization, such as the emergence of cities, agriculture, writing, and religions as we know them. The warmer Holocene is the period in which we supposedly are at the moment, but “the possibility of anthropogenic climate change has raised the question of its termination,” such as explained by Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty in an essay entitled “The Climate of History: Four Theses”:

Now that humans—thanks to our numbers, the burning of fossil fuel, and other related activities—have become a geological agent on the planet, some scientists have proposed that we recognize the beginning of a new geological era, one in which humans act as a main determinant of the environment of the planet. The name they have coined for this new geological age is Anthropocene. (208-9)

This essay by Chakrabarty, one of the great meditations of our time, suggests that a distinction to which we had grown accustomed, namely geological time versus human time, may well be approaching a definitive crisis. The temporality of the Earth as a much longer, extended process encompassing a human time that pales and shrinks in comparison now needs to be understood in the context of a set of human activities that have the power to do significant, permanent damage to the planet. If we once thought that geological facts were so grand that nothing that humans could do would change them, we must now wrestle with the fact that deforestation, desertification, the burning of fossil fuel, the acidification of the oceans, and several other human-led destructive activities have changed the most basic processes of the Earth. In other words, anthropological time has caught up with geological time in ways hitherto unthought.

The main conclusion drawn by Chakrabarty from the advent of the Anthropocene is that it is no longer possible to write the histories of globalization, capital, and culture without taking into account, at the same time, the history of the species. There are so many of us cutting down so many trees and burning so many fossils that the history of our culture can no longer be separated from the history of nature as it once was. Whereas during the Holocene one could argue for a somewhat clear-cut separation between nature and culture, a reasonably stable distinction between the temporality of the planet and the temporality of human history, we have now become geological agents to such a degree that the very dichotomy between ecology and culture must be called into question. Whereas “for centuries scientists thought that earth processes were so large and powerful that nothing we could do could change them [...] that human chronologies were insignificant compared with the vastness of geological time” (Oreskes qtd. in Chakrabarty 206), our time is characterized by an unprecedented convergence between ecology and culture, whereby it is no longer possible to separate human history and natural history. As Chakrabarty states, it is only recently that humans have become geological agents to the extent that the dynamic of human history has begun to impact natural history. We must, therefore, “put global histories of capital in conversation with the species history of humans” (212).

The separation between human history and natural history had been a relatively stable

one at least since Hobbes and Vico. Given their trajectory in recent decades, the humanities find themselves in a particular bind when that dichotomy collapses. If we could single out the major feature that traverses them in the 20th century, it would be the culturalization that has accompanied the so-called linguistic turn of the humanistic disciplines and the social sciences. The culturalist critique of naturalization has been one of their distinctive features over the past century, if not the structuring, defining one. The unveiling as cultural of traits assumed or mistaken as natural has been the bread and butter of our fields for many decades. In that operation, nature occupies the position of a receding horizon, a limit that keeps being pushed back toward a realm that is never really present, never embodying a positive existence. In that model, we do not really know what nature is, only what it is not and what the mistaken other has taken it to be. Throughout the 20th century nature has been a constant presence in the humanities, but only negatively, as the object of an operation of denaturalization. The renewed inseparability of natural history and human history experienced today challenges the humanities to understand nature in ways other than simply through the lens of a culturalist critique of naturalization. It is no longer enough to unveil the cultural ground of concepts, notions, and habits hitherto taken to be natural. In the urgency of the ecological crisis we live today we can no longer afford not to face the question of a nature as positivity.

The challenge is, then, to think nature as positivity, that is, to account for *physis* in our thought processes and interventions into culture in ways that are not simply reducible to the well-known operations of denaturalization. My hypothesis here is that such thinking would lead us to a significantly different understanding of human rights, in tune with innovative experiences brought about by constitutions such as Ecuador's and Bolivia's (promulgated respectively in 2008 and 2009), which have expanded the notion of subject of rights beyond the human species. This is a paradox only on the surface, of course: it is precisely in the Anthropocene, the period marked by human centrality in climate change, that we must remove the *anthropos* from its position as exclusive subject and target of our juridical framework. In order to accomplish that task anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's Amerindian perspectivism has proven an ally.

Amerindian Perspectivism: The animal as former human.

Amerindian societies have, in fact, a wealth of knowledge accumulated in what we might call a non-anthropocentric understanding of the world, the most sophisticated account of which has coalesced around the theory of Amerindian perspectivism, developed by Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro over the past two decades. It should be pointed out at the outset that “perspectivism” here is not reducible to relativism, subjectivism, or any of the other correlate terms within the Western philosophical tradition. In fact, Amerindian perspectivism, Viveiros has argued, should be understood as orthogonal to the opposition between universalism and relativism (“Os pronomes” 115). It is not that Amerindians believe that different species see the world from different perspectives. It is rather the opposite: all species see the world in the same way, “what changes is the world that they see” (*Metafísicas*). In other words, Amerindian perspectivism is not a multiculturalism because a perspective is not a representation. According to Viveiros de Castro, Amerindian perspectivism is better defined as a *multinaturalism*, in which different species experience and see different worlds. This will become clearer once we establish the difference between Western and Amerindian perceptions of body and soul, such as illustrated by an anecdote told by Lévi-Strauss both in *Race et histoire* and in *Tristes tropiques*.

Emblematic for Amerindian perspectivism, Lévi-Strauss's anecdote recounts that a few years after the colonial encounter the Spaniards sent investigative commissions to the Antilles to find out whether or not Amerindians had souls. Meanwhile, Caribbean natives conducted an ethnographic experiment of their own, submerging a few white prisoners in order to find out, after extended observation, if their corpses were subject to putrefaction (*Metafísicas*), i.e. *whether or not they had a body*. Viveiros de Castro takes this event as an allegory of the fundamental contrast between Western anthropocentrism and Amerindian perspectivism. From the Western standpoint, regardless of whether we are relativists or universalists, nature i.e. the body, is that which is shared by all of us, human and non-human animals alike—hence the Spaniards' doubt about whether or not Amerindians had a soul. From the Amerindian standpoint things are precisely the opposite: a soul, i.e. personhood as such, is that which all living beings share, regardless of whether they are human or non-human animals. What

differentiates them is their bodies, not the presence of a soul, the attribute of rationality or the possibility of immortality. A whole anthropocentric edifice, shared by several brands of idealism and materialism alike (Marxism included), had differentiated animals from humans by ascribing to the latter some attribute lacking in the former. Instead, Amerindian worldviews see the attributes proper to humanity as a *position* that can be occupied by other species as well. Viveiros de Castro argues that this conception can be found within Amerindian societies throughout the Americas, from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, and it turns our opposition between nature and culture upside down in many interesting ways, as we will see.

The importance of positionality in Viveiros de Castro's oeuvre harks back to his ethnographic work, particularly the interpretation of cannibalism among the Araweté, a people of Tupi-Guarani language in the Western Amazon. Whereas one of the founding fathers of Brazilian sociology, Florestan Fernandes, had interpreted Tupinambá cannibalism as sacrifice, Viveiros de Castro questioned the idea that there was a supernatural entity implied in the act, to whom something was presumably being offered, and attempted instead to answer the question “what exactly does one eat in the enemy being cannibalized?” by describing the syntax of the act, rather than the substance of what was eaten. Testimonies endowing the bodies being eaten with some attribute were fairly rare and inconclusive, and Viveiros de Castro argued instead that “what was eaten was the relation of enemies with their devourers or, put differently, its condition as an enemy. What was assimilated from the victims were the signs of their alterity, and what was sought was this alterity as a point of view upon the self” (*Metafísicas*). What you cannibalize is a perspective, a position, a point of view, not an essence or a substance. This postulate implied not only a reinterpretation of cannibalism but also a rethinking of the premises of the discipline itself, as it was no longer a matter of doing anthropology to describe life such as it was lived from the indigenous point of view, as traditionally envisioned by European anthropology. Instead, it was a matter of describing the assumption of a position, that of the enemy, in a transmutation of perspectives in which “the self is determined as other by the act of incorporation of this other” (*Metafísicas*). It no longer made sense to speak of a dichotomy between Western and Amerindian worldviews, but rather a fundamental difference between the ways in which each side perceived the dichotomy itself.

Whereas the former apprehended it according to a logic of contradiction (things are either A or B), the latter conceived *the entire dichotomy* as a line of flight, an essentially transformational understanding of the world.

A piece by Viveiros de Castro entitled “Myrtle and Marble: On the Inconstancy of the Savage Soul” will help unravel these questions. The metaphor in the title is taken from the famous *Sermon of the Holy Ghost* (1657), by Portuguese Father Antonio Vieira, where he contrasted marble statues, which take time and work to be built, but need no adjustments later, to myrtle statues, far easier to build but in constant need to be trimmed later. Vieira compares the indigenous populations met by the Portuguese in Brazil to myrtle statues, as they “receive everything taught to them with great sweetness and easiness, without arguing, replicating, doubting or resisting; but they are myrtle statues which, as the gardener raises his hand and scissors, soon lose their new figure and revert back to the natural and previous brutality, to being jungle like before” (Vieira qtd. in Viveiros *A Inconstância* 184). Evangelization thus takes the form of a mnemonic machine, an antidote against the supposedly amnesic nature of the Amerindians. Native Americans, of course, were only amnesic when looked at from the standpoint of a colonialist conception based on an identitarian, Aristotelian logic according to which one either *is* or *is not*. If Amerindians appeared to have learned and assimilated a lesson, it was reasonable to assume that they would act accordingly the following day. But that did not happen.

Portuguese chronicles in the 16th and 17th centuries are filled with the perplexity caused by the Tupinambá's response to evangelization: they did not seem to oppose Portuguese religious beliefs with a structured set of beliefs of their own. They did not react by insisting on a contradictory account of the world, an alternative cosmogony to compete with the Christian one. They appeared malleable, accepting, and mimetic of the Portuguese values only, in a second moment, to look like they had forgotten everything and moved on to something else. In other words, what stunned the Portuguese was not the fact that there was a completely different set of beliefs in play. It was not the presence of a cosmogony contradictory with the Christian one. It was, rather, that the Tupinambá seemed to operate outside the Aristotelian logic of identity and non-contradiction altogether. As Viveiros notes, for Amerindians it was not

a matter of “imposing their identity upon the other or refuse it in the name of one's own ethnic excellence, but rather transforming one's identity by actualizing a relationship with the other. The inconstancy of the savage soul, in its moment of opening, is the expression of a mode of being where ‘exchange, not identity, is the fundamental value to be affirmed’” (*A Inconstância* 206). Much like Pierre Clastres invited us to think the paradox of a non-coercive power, a position of authority based on deprivation,⁵ it is the puzzling images of a religion without a set of closed beliefs and a cultural order not predicated upon the exclusion of others that must be grasped here. The Portuguese faced as an enemy not another dogma, but indifference and inconstancy vis-à-vis dogma as such. The absence of a properly evangelical, dogmatic stance toward belief is linked with an essentially transformational conception of the world, where humanity and animality are understood in terms very different from our own.

Viveiros de Castro notes that if there is a virtually universal notion within Amerindian thought, it is that of an originary state of indifferentiation between humans and animals. But “*the original condition common to humans and animals is not animality, but humanity*” (“Os Pronomes” 119; my emphasis), as Amerindian myths often tell the story of how animals look the way they do because they have lost attributes proper to humans. Whereas we have traditionally assumed that we are, in a way, former animals (as the narratives of Western anthropocentrism invariably tell the story of a passage from an animality that we share with non-human animals to the specificity of the human essence that only we possess), Amerindian thought invites us to think of *animals as former humans*. In a lecture entitled “Death as Almost an Event,” Viveiros de Castro relates some of the several Amerindian myths that tell the story of how jaguars—a key animal here, as the predator par excellence in the Amazonian biome—shed their skins and reveal themselves as persons when they are away from humans. It is important not to reduce this dynamic to our well-known opposition between appearance and essence. It is not that the body is understood as mere clothing hiding the true essence, but the opposite: clothing itself is taken as a body. Remember that in Amerindian societies animal masks “are endowed with the power of metaphysically transforming the identity of their bearers” (Viveiros “Os Pronomes” 133). Clothing and masks are understood less as cloaks that hide an essence than as assemblages capable of mobilizing another body. Humanity remains within animals as a

force visible only to the eyes of that species itself or to the trans-specific figure of the Shaman. Amerindian ontologies often resort to clothing as a component of metamorphoses that have always been part of a “highly transformational world” (Rivière qtd. in Viveiros “Os Pronomes” 117). The result is, then, that although we see ourselves as persons, that perception differs from the way other species perceive us and themselves. Jaguars too see themselves as persons. In their eyes, we are nothing but prey, wild pigs.

Viveiros locates in Amazonian ethnography countless references to an Amerindian theory according to which the way humans see animals (as well as other subjectivities that populate the universe: gods, spirits, the dead, meteorological phenomena, sometimes even objects and artifacts) is profoundly different from the way these beings see humans and see themselves. Typically, humans see themselves as humans, animals as animals, and spirits (if they see them) as spirits; but predator animals and spirits, according to Amerindian cosmologies, see humans as animals (as prey). On the other hand, preys see humans as spirits or animal predators, while predator animals and spirits see themselves as humans. They apprehend themselves (or become) anthropomorphized and experience their own habits under the sign of *culture*, not nature. They see their food as human food (jaguars see blood as cauim, for example) and their corporeal attributes (beaks, claws, etc.) as cultural instruments. Their social system is organized much like human institutions, with shamans, chiefs, feasts, rites, etc. When the jaguar sees you, he is the one who is a person. He is the one endowed with attributes of personhood. You are a prey. In other words, whereas the Western debate between relativism and objectivism addresses the primacy of a subject position vis-à-vis the object (or the other way around), in Amerindian perspectivism we have a whole system altogether, where the subject position itself is variable and can be occupied by humans, animals, plants, the Earth, and so forth.

A few more conclusions should be drawn from the postulates of a primordial state of indifferentiation between humans and animals, and an original condition common to humans and animals which is not, as we usually think in the West, animality, but rather, humanity. Whereas we see nature as a common ground from which different cultures took off and differentiated among themselves (the narratives of our humanization being, by and large,

stories of a move away from a condition of nature), Amerindian myths tell the story of how animals lost the attributes inherited or maintained by humans. Animals can be, then, for Amerindian thought, former humans. For us, naturally, things are precisely the opposite: we are, in a way, former animals who have acquired, or been endowed with, attributes of humanity, be they immortality, awareness of temporality, rationality or the ability to produce and reproduce our own means of existence. “The Spaniards never doubted that the Indians had bodies (animals also had them); the Indians never doubted that the Spaniards had souls (also animals and specters of the dead had them)” (Viveiros *A Inconstância* 431). In other words, in Amerindian cosmogonies, there is no primacy of human consciousness as such, insofar as “consciousness” or “soul” are thought of as attributes of personhood with which members of any species may happen to be endowed, depending purely on what locus of enunciation and perspective they occupy. Personhood is “a phenomenological unity that is purely pronominal in kind applied to a real radical diversity” (Viveiros “Perspectival Anthropology” 6). There is no human essence insofar as humanity becomes a purely positional concept.

Viveiros de Castro's concept of equivocation may help us understand how irreducible to simple relativism Amerindian perspectivism really is. The Brazilian anthropologist elaborates the concept from the insight that Lévi-Strauss' anecdote is not simply “about” perspectivism but is, rather, “*itself* perspectivist, instantiating the same framework or structure manifest in the innumerable Amerindian myths thematizing interspecific perspectivism” (Viveiros “Perspectival Anthropology” 9). One example, recalls Viveiros, is the myth that relates how a human protagonist gets lost in the forest and arrives at a village whose dwellers invite him to a gourd of “manioc beer,” only to see him horrified when they serve him a gourd brimming with human blood. The point here is not only that misunderstanding is a common component of how the anthropologist perceives the native, as countless anthropologists have pointed out. In the Amerindian case, the “reality” that the anthropologist attempts to describe *is itself structured and constituted through a multiple ensemble of “misunderstandings”* and conceptualizations of them, a fact which ascribes to the notion a meaning entirely different from what Aristotelian logic usually does. As Viveiros de Castro notes, equivocation is not a simple error, illusion or misreading in the usual sense. In contrast to these, equivocation “is a

properly transcendental category of anthropology, a constitutive dimension of the discipline's project of cultural translation. It expresses a *de jure* structure, a figure immanent to anthropology. It is not merely a negative facticity, but a condition of possibility of anthropological discourse" ("Perspectival Anthropology" 10). Whereas errors or deceptions presuppose a failure within a given language game, equivocation is "what unfolds in the *interval* between different language games" ("Perspectival Anthropology" 11). The Amerindian perspectivism described above is, then, itself a theory of equivocation, not simply a case of it. Mere constructivism, that is, the well-known argument that there is no natural or prior reality and the real is itself constructed by discourse, is clearly not enough to account for what takes place here. There is a world of difference between "a world where the primordial is experienced as naked transcendence, pure antianthropocentric alterity" (that is to say, the world of empiricist naturalism that constructivism dismantles) and, on the other hand, "a world of immanent humanity, where the primordial takes on human form (which does not make it necessarily tranquilizing), for there, where everything is human, the human is something else entirely" ("Perspectival Anthropology" 16). In other words, one cannot denaturalize the primordial ground by bringing into the picture the volition and intentionality of discourse in a world where the fundamental attributes of the primordial ground are, precisely, human-like volition and intentionality.

How can, then, a world where, in a way, "everything is human" serve us as an antidote to anthropocentrism? Is that not a contradiction in terms? Viveiros de Castro's analysis of the pronominal structure underlying the Amerindian experience can be instructive here. Whereas the first person pronoun "I" is the proper instance endowed with a soul or a spirit, and the third person "he/she" is the impersonal domain of nature, the second person "you" covers "supernature in the form of the Other as a subject" (Viveiros "Os Pronomes" 135). Viveiros here relates an archetypal encounter often narrated in Amerindian societies: a man, always alone in the forest, sees a being which, initially thought to be an animal, turns out to be a spirit or a dead person who then *speaks* to that man. That interpellation—to evoke the Althusserian scene with which this one has some parallels—may result deadly to the protagonist, who is objectified by the other entity, turns over to the other side, and ceases to be human, becoming

mere prey. Amerindian words that get translated as “human being” tend to function, “pragmatically if not syntactically, less as nouns than as pronouns” (Viveiros *A Inconstância* 371). And here it is the distinction between our anthropocentrism and Amerindian anthropomorphism that must be grasped. Instead of seeing humanity as essentially endowed with attributes that animals lack —as in the classic Marxian formula, “animals produce unilaterally, men produce universally,” Amerindian thought sees humanity as a point of view: we see ourselves as humans, but jaguars do too. And they see us, in turn, as prey. As Viveiros notes, this is a radical displacement upon the concept of humanity: if all can be humans, then we are not so unique or special. Western anthropocentrism and Amerindian anthropomorphism are, then, not only rather different, but imply, in fact, diametrically opposed stances toward the world and other species. Amerindian anthropomorphization is anti-anthropocentric.

The Concept of Non-Human Rights

The lessons of Amerindian perspectivism become particularly relevant once we view them in the light of the situation described in the Chakrabarty article quoted at the beginning, the ushering of a new era in which human beings have become such a destructive force that we have now taken on the status of geological agents. Our concepts of development, capitalist and socialist alike, have been predicated on the unspoken assumptions that resources are infinite and the possibilities of exploring them, endless, as well as on a conception of human rationality based on the subjection and exploitation of non-humans and nature. Confronted for the first time with the concrete vision of a global shortage of water and other natural resources, as well as with the fact that human activity has exceeded the biological productive capacity of the planet (the World Wildlife Fund has reached the conclusion that humankind is now using resources equivalent to a planet and a half), it is the very primacy of the human and the exclusivity of the human species as the only subject of rights that must be questioned. A copious bibliography in Legal Studies has elaborated on the latter point, exploring how limiting and impoverishing the anthropocentric conception of rights can be (Nash 13-32; Rodrigues 197-213; Bevilaqua 86-99).⁶ More and more foundations have been laid for not only animals but

also nature itself (*Pachamama*, in the Andes; *Gaia*, in James Lovelock's formulation) to acquire the status of a subject endowed with rights. Both the Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008 and the Bolivian Constitution of 2009 are imbued with wisdom learned from Amerindian peoples in order to grant rivers, animals, and other non-human components of nature the status of subjects endowed with rights. Article 255 of the Bolivian Constitution establishes the principles of “harmony with nature, defense of biodiversity and the prohibition of private appropriation for use and exclusive exploitation of plants, animals, microorganisms, and any living matter” (59). Going beyond the mere granting of those rights to non-human subjects, other scholars have argued that it is not enough to make of nature a juridical subject if we do not question how much of it has entered into our own concept of *property* (Figueroa 16-7). That is, the very understanding of the natural world as an object in a relation of ownership in which humans are always subjects must be rethought as, in Figueroa's felicitous formulation, “there is too much nature in the notion of property” (16).

When it comes to this renewed imbrication between cultural and ecological questions, Latin America is not a terrain among others. In a context of unprecedented devastation to the environment, the Amazon, as the world's greatest reservoir of biological diversity, concentrates some of the most decisive political and ecological conflicts of our time. This is visible in Bolivia's intra-indigenous struggle regarding the highway to be built across the Tipnis park, in violation of indigenous land; in the Peruvian nationalist government's embrace of a developmentalist agenda, with severe damage to its Amazonian ecosystem; or in the (presumably center-left) Brazilian administration's inheritance of the military dictatorship's hydroelectric-based model of development for the region. In Brazil, particularly the construction of the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam on the Xingu River has meant an unprecedented attack on indigenous rights, with damages to “the river of national diversity” that could prove irreparable. The Belo Monte controversy was also an opportunity for the country's first serious discussion, in courts, of nature as a subject of rights, as the Public Prosecutor explicitly called anthropocentric jurisprudence “outdated” and, through an analogy with the 19th century expansion of juridical status to slaves, argued that nature's rights were being violated.⁷

The unprecedented ecological crisis of which we are both agents and, along with

animals, plants, and *Pachamama* as a whole, victims, is a clear case of what Timothy Morton has called “hyperobjects,” i.e. those objects that defy our perception of time and space, because “they are distributed around the globe in such a way that we cannot directly apprehend them, as they produce effects the duration of which far outlasts the scale of human life as we know it” (Danowski 2). The ecological crisis is, then, at the same time obvious and invisible, urgent and long-lasting, specifically contemporary and radically untimely. As can be deduced from all of the above, the very urgency of a concept of non-human rights is a product of anthropocentric reason as well as a reminder of its limits and shortcomings. The final paradox may very well be that the most powerful critique of anthropocentric reason today comes from Amerindian narratives structured around the anthropomorphization of animals, spirits, plants, and bodies of water. What remains to be seen is whether or not it is too late to learn from them that in a world where everything is human, being human is not that special.

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Notes

¹ In *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory*, Carole Pateman makes the very interesting observation that out of the three major tenets of the French Revolution—equality, liberty, fraternity—, the latter was always the least studied and interrogated, a fact not unrelated to the aporia described above, whereby an explicitly gendered term is presumably made to stand for humanity as such.

² All translations are mine.

³ One of the great insights of Alexandre Nodari's dissertation, "Censura: Ensaio sobre a 'servidão imaginária,'" is the argument that our times have lost the understanding that censorship also implies "the creation of a regime of control and measurement of the visible" (10), that is to say, we have come to miss the etymological link between censorship and *census*. Michel Foucault's biopolitics, of course, offers a framework to link census and power, but the connections with censorship—precisely because Foucault's model emphasizes so strongly the concept of power as production of the sayable—remain to be unraveled. Nodari's dissertation is a remarkable contribution to this agenda.

⁴ The following section includes and rewrites passages from an article of mine entitled "Contemporary Intersections of Ecology and Culture: On Amerindian Perspectivism and the Critique of Anthropocentrism," forthcoming in *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*. Some passages have been modified and expanded, others appear in the same form as in the previous article.

⁵ In *Society Against the State*, Clastres solves the seemingly paradoxical question of a non-coercive form of power by pointing to Amerindian societies where the chief is required to be generous to the extreme and deprive himself of material goods. The system is based on the postulate that "the chief conveys nothing but his dependence on the group" (45).

⁶ The intersection between Legal Studies and Environmental Studies is a vast field in which I can claim

no expertise. To those who are, like me, approaching it recently, the first chapter of Roderick Nash's classic *The Rights of Nature*, which begins with John Locke, offers a very useful account of the clash between the anthropocentrism of natural rights theory and “a weaker yet persistent notion that leads directly to the concept of expanded community on which environmental ethics rests” (19-20). Bevilaqua's article “Chimpanzés em juízo” reviews two legal cases, one in Brazil and the other in Sierra Leone, in which chimpanzees were recognized as subjects of rights, thereby highlighting, according to Bevilaqua's astute conclusion, “the need conceptually to manufacture another difference [...], as the attempts to dissolve the differences between humans and non-humans seem doomed to failure” (99).

- ⁷ A vast bibliography documents the illegality and ecocidal impact of the Belo Monte dam. For a compilation of fifty items that spell out the history of this attack on the rights of nature and indigenous peoples of the Amazon, see Avelar.